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ABSTRACT

The Peale family could be termed the "first family" of U.S. art. The patriarch, Charles Willson Peale, was an accomplished painter, scientist, inventor, founder of museums and art societies; his dynasty included his nine children and his younger brother, James Peale. This teaching guide discusses their diverse contributions to U.S. art and describes James Peale's best-known painting, "Fruit Still Life with Chinese Export Basket." The guide provides illustrations of 12 Peale paintings (6 by Rembrandt Peale) and suggests activities for elementary school, middle school, and high school. (BT)

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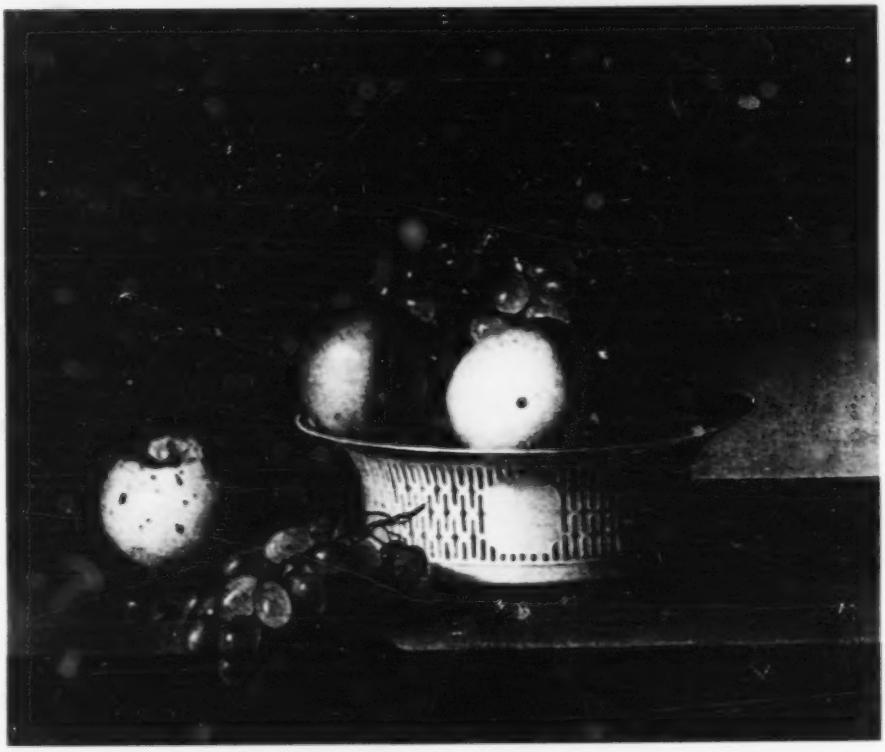
The First Family of American Art

A Guide for Teachers



James Peale, Fruit Still Life with Chinese Export Basket, 1824

F. P. Smith

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The First Family of American Art

Teacher's Guide

This teaching guide was prepared by Ruth R. Perlin, Head, Department of Education Resources, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Additional information is available on the National Gallery's web site at **http://www.nga.gov**

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The First Family of American Art

Truth is better than a high finish.
-- Charles Willson Peale

If we recall the founders of this nation and the leaders of the new republic, we can easily recount the names--Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams. But we should consider ranking artists among our nation's early leaders--for example, Gilbert Stuart, John Singleton Copley, and Charles Willson Peale and his family. We could even term the Peales a "first family"of American art. The patriarch, Charles Willson Peale, was an accomplished painter, scientist, inventor, founder of museums and art societies; his dynasty included his nine children, many of whom were named after famous painters and who were themselves artists. His younger brother James Peale was an important member of this family of artists.

James Peale

Born in 1749 in Chestertown, Maryland, James later moved to Annapolis. In 1762 he began to serve apprenticeships--first in Charles' saddlery and later in a cabinetmaking shop, while Charles was in London studying art with the renowned painter, Benjamin West. After Charles' return to Annapolis in 1769, James became his older brother's studio assistant and pupil. James' artistic pursuits were interrupted by the American Revolution, and after completing military service in the Maryland Regiment, he settled in Philadelphia, where Charles and his family also resided.

Two Styles of Portraiture

The brothers were both portrait painters, but divided that specialty between them: Charles painted large, life-size portraits of prominent citizens, while James concentrated on painting miniatures. By the mid-1780s, James had established his reputation as a painter of miniature portraits, for which his tight, linear style was well suited. At this time he also explored landscape painting, a subject to which he would return in his later years.

Painting miniatures is a demanding pursuit, requiring intense focus on minute details; it is not surprising that after more than twenty years, James' eyesight began to weaken. Around 1810 he gave up painting miniatures and focused instead on large portraits and still-life subjects that were greatly admired and widely exhibited in Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore. His style had become more painterly, with supple brushstrokes, harmonious tones, strong masses balanced against each other and subtle effects of light and shadow. It was a style that lent itself to portraiture and still-life painting, as well as to the dramatic landscapes he painted in the last decade of his life.

Still-Life Painting

In the hierarchy of subjects in art, history painting--the depiction of grand events, including subjects drawn from classical literature and the Bible--and portraiture traditionally have been most highly esteemed. Even landscape did not achieve

independent status as a subject worthy of depiction--rather than merely "background"--until the seventeenth century.

It was also at that time that still life became a highly regarded, independent subject for paintings. Particularly in Holland, where a large and prosperous middle class had developed, demand for the scenes and articles of everyday life fostered the emergence of an art that captured these tangible realities.

Genre scenes, landscapes, and still-life paintings were among those most popular among the hardworking burghers of Holland. Like the seventeenth-century Dutch merchant class, the citizens of the new American republic in the early nineteenth century also valued images of the "fruits of their labors." American artists of the time furnished not only the portraits demanded by the public, but also images of the materia! goods that could result from hard work and good fortune. To a large extent, the still-life paintings by the Peales, James and his nephew, Raphaelle, established the canon for this subject in American painting.

American Still Lifes

Painters in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have been familiar with Dutch and French precedents for still-life subjects, as they could have seen copies, prints, and an occasional original painting imported from abroad. Typical tabletop arrangements--as in this painting--showed fruit, other foodstuffs, or flowers carefully arranged in the shallow space of the table's surface. The goods were usually held in a container of some sort, with a few resting on the table itself.

American still lifes differed from their European prototypes by being less opulent and more secular, that is, less fraught with specific allusions to weighty religious, moral, or allegorical content. Indeed, the impulse to capture specific appearances in the most palpable fashion is said to be a characteristic of American art in general.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, particularly in Philadelphia--a flourishing scientific and cultural center--the interest in recording and classifying the appearance of forms in the natural world expressed itself in many realms, including the arts. In Philadelphia, the Peales were at the very center of this intellectual activity. This painting reflects that scientific, documentary tendency in the very careful, deliberate depiction of the fruit. Peale is meticulous in his rendering of their stage of ripeness and includes every blemish.

Fruit Still Life with Chinese Export Basket, 1824

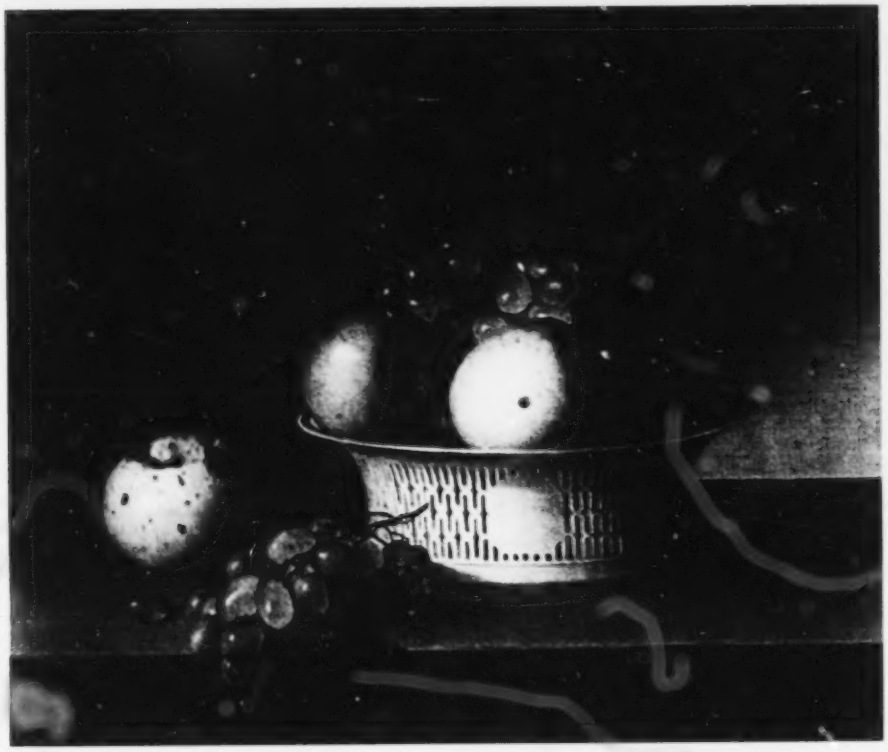
This modest, quiet composition is enlivened by gentle plays of light and shadow: the soft illumination of the fruit enhances its roundness and contrasts with the dark, shadowed wall behind. Other subtle juxtapositions come into play: round forms against flat, seen in the forms of fruit and basket and the straight edges of the table, flat tabletop and background wall. Repetition of curves, seen in the round forms of the small grapes, larger globelike apples, and the oval of the basket establishes rhythmic motion through the composition. The cadences are punctuated by the artist's whimsical

touch: the curling tendrils of the grape stems above the basket actually form his initials: J P.

Although the work is not strongly allusive, the choice of fruit--ripe apples and grapes--suggests the autumn harvest and may be a subtle reference to the painter's advanced age at the time this was painted.

Peale distinguishes between the organic world of nature represented by the fruit rendered in soft brushstrokes, and the manmade realm, seen in the Chinese porcelain basket, whose hard, glossy, vitreous surface is described in tight, precise brushstrokes. Yet these worlds of nature and of manufacture and technology are disposed in a careful balance, one acting as a foil for the other. It has been noted that such an image, elegantly composed of clearly defined, carefully balanced yet disparate forms, may also reflect ideas of order that prevailed in the early years of the American Republic. These ideas are also expressed in the architecture of the time, as well as in our governmental structure, which is based on a system of checks and balances.

The First Family of American Art



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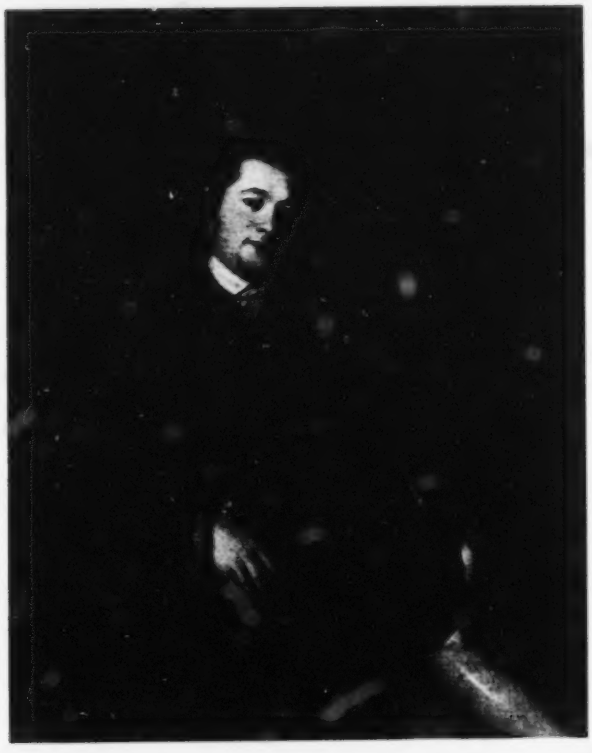

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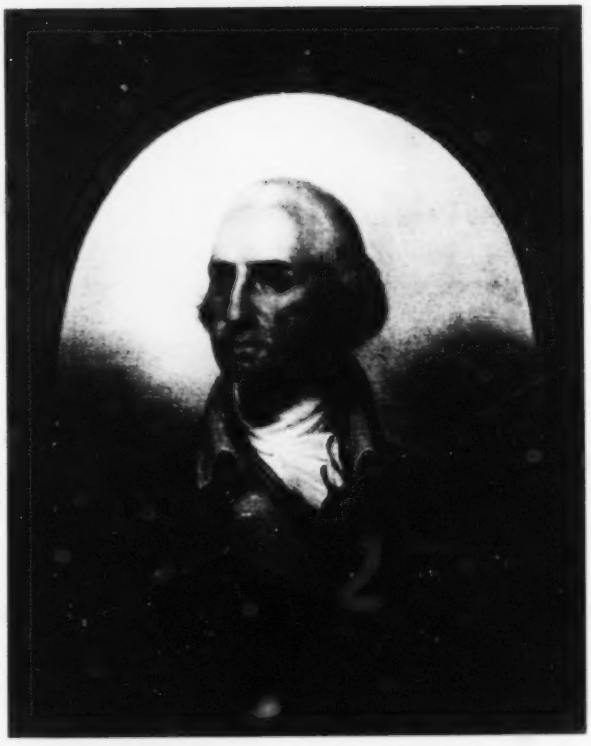

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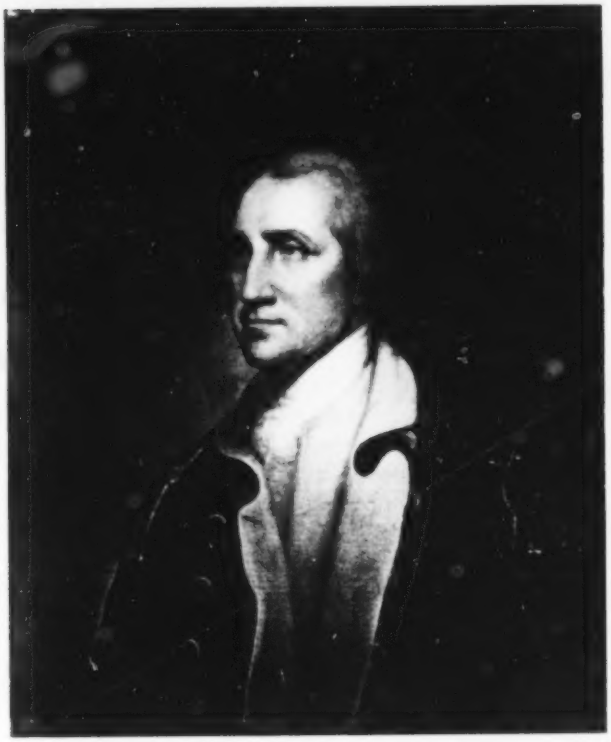

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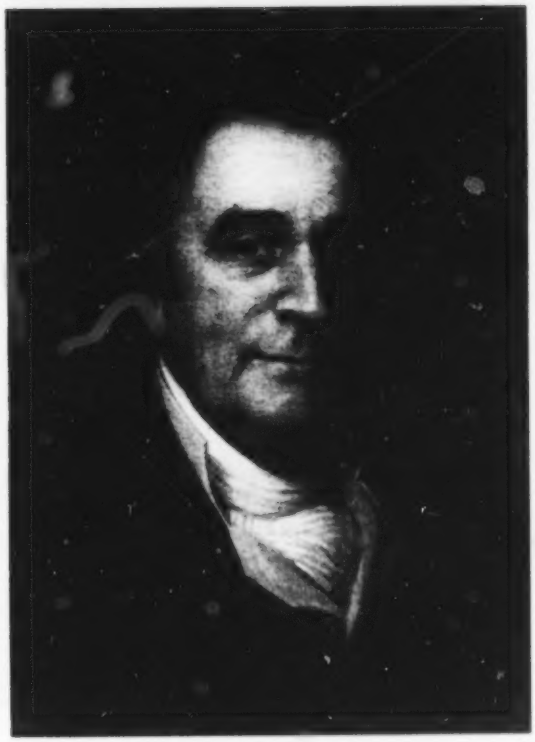

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Captions

1. James Peale, Fruit Still Life with Chinese Export Basket, 1824, oil on wood, 1990.7.1
2. Charles Willson Peale, John Beale Bordley, c. 1770, watercolor on ivory, 1986.78.1
3. Charles Willson Peale, Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming, 1788, oil on canvas, 1966.10.1
4. Charles Willson Peale, John Philip de Haas, 1772, oil on canvas, 1942.8.9
5. Charles Willson Peale, John Beale Bordley, 1770, oil on canvas, 1984.2.1
6. Rembrandt Peale, Dr. John Warren, c. 1806, black, white, and light brown chalk on dark brown paper, 1980.4.4
7. Rembrandt Peale, George Washington, c. 1850, oil on canvas, 1942.7.1
8. Rembrandt Peale, George Washington, 1859, oil on canvas, 1947.17.16
9. Rembrandt Peale, Richardson Stuart, c. 1815, oil on canvas, 1947.17.85
10. Rembrandt Peale, Rubens Peale with a Geranium, 1801, oil on canvas, 1985.59.1
11. Rembrandt Peale, Thomas Sully, 1859, oil on canvas board, 1955.2.1
12. Rembrandt Peale, Timothy Matlack, 1802, oil on canvas, 1947.17.10

References/Resources

Craven, Wayne, American Art: History & Culture, New York, 1994.

Miller, Lillian B., ed. The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy 1770-1870, New York, 1996.

Willmerding, John, American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art, New York, 1988.

ACTIVITIES

Arrange a still-life scene, choosing objects you see at home or in school. Draw, paint, or photograph your still-life composition.

Elementary/Middle School

1. Tell your classmates about your still life, why you chose those objects, why you arranged them as you did, and what the objects represent to you.

2. The Chinese export porcelain basket shown in the painting was an object that belonged to Peale's family. It is shown in many of his paintings; in fact, we might call it one of his "favorite things." What is your favorite object? Choose one that belongs to you or your family. Tell why it is one of your favorites. Using this object as the central focus, design a picture around it.

3. Find examples of still-life paintings by other American artists. Choose some from other times (Hint: still-life paintings by Harnett, Peto, William Merritt Chase, O'Keeffe, Lichtenstein). Compare them with James Peale's Fruit Still Life with Chinese Export Basket. In what ways are they alike? Different? Can you tell when they were painted? How?

4. James Peale has used mainly round, curving forms in his painting. Compose a still-life arrangement using mainly angular geometric forms, such as squares, rectangles, triangles. Is it different in effect from the Peale painting? How?

5. Peale's painting is very realistic. Draw the outlines of the forms depicted, and translate this naturalistic composition into an abstract one. Do the formal balances still pertain?

High School

Write an essay about your still-life composition including explanations of your ideas in selecting these objects and your objectives in arranging them as you did.

1. James Peale lived from1749-1831. List the important events that occurred in the history of the United States during his lifetime.

2. Define: balance, composition, organic, linear, painterly.